

**Between Mondrian
and Minimalism:
Neo-Plasticism in America**

**Whitney Museum
of American Art**

**Downtown at
Federal Reserve Plaza**

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Cover: Michael Loew, *Interchangeable Forms*, 1953

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In the initial issue of the Dutch art journal *De Stijl* (1917), Piet Mondrian published the first of a series of essays describing his abstract, reductive concept of painting. The term he used was "de Nieuwe Beelding"—the new form or shape. Three years later, while in Paris, Mondrian expanded these essays into a book entitled *Le Néo-Plasticisme*, and this is the term that today designates one of the groundbreaking movements in the history of twentieth-century abstraction. The classic Mondrian Neo-Plastic compositions included only horizontal and vertical lines that delineated simple rectilinear shapes. Colors were limited to the three primaries — red, blue, and yellow — along with the "non-colors" black, white, and gray. One of the fundamental aims of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism was the production of a purely abstract art, that is, an art not derived from any source in nature or the visible, material world and, therefore, utterly devoid of representational allusions or reference to specific objects.

In America during the 1930s, Neo-Plasticism represented one option within a wide variety of modernist schools whose advocates carried on often heated debates about the definition and meanings of abstraction. Among American artists interested in European modernism, the rectilinear forms of Neo-Plasticism remained the most valid and convincing demonstration of an ever elusive pure abstraction — what Charles Shaw referred to as the "intrinsically plastic." The achievement and intrinsic value of PURE FORM — as capitalized by I. Rice Pereira — were contentious issues among American abstractionists. Unlike other modernist styles, which accepted a broad range of forms, "Neoplasticism," in Ilya Bolotowsky's adamant definition, "totally avoids the appearance of figurative images, whether straight or ambivalent." Similarly, Jean Xceron spoke of the Neo-Plasticist assertion of going "so far as to dispense with nature and life altogether." For American artists who adopted the limited compositional vocabulary of Neo-Plasticism, any curvilinear forms, such as those common to Surrealist creations, inevitably introduced figurative allusions to natural organisms. However, it was the Suprematist paintings of Kasimir Malevich, the later geometric compositions of Wassily Kandinsky, as well as the

Constructivist works of the brothers Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner that presented the greatest challenges to Neo-Plasticism. Although these Russian modernist movements produced abstract art — art that made no reference to existing objects and invented rather than depicted forms — their configurations of isolated shapes against a neutral background could be perceived as generic objects floating freely in an anonymous space. "Suprematist paintings," Ilya Bolotowsky wrote, "remind one of bird's eye views of tremendous snowy landscapes with houses. This is an aspect that Neoplasticism avoids."

The abutting lines and rectangles characteristic of Neo-Plasticism formed a composition evenly distributed over the entire picture surface. It was convincingly argued that, with such a design, any area within a painting could be read interchangeably as either object or space. This visual phenomenon was central to Fritz Glarner: "When the form area and the space area are of the same structure, a new aspect arises in which pure means can reveal their intrinsic expression.... It is my belief that the truth will manifest itself more clearly through this new condition." This refusal to define a shape as matter or void made the relative spatial relationships between forms — whether one shape lay in front of, behind, or alongside another — to some extent ambiguous. This is precisely the effect that Alice Trumbull Mason extolled: "I intend displacement and not the APPEARANCE of one color lying in back or in front of another. This is my intention because I am convinced that a work of Twentieth Century art should no longer imitate nature."

Through such formal analyses, artists who advocated a Neo-Plastic style were able to claim a greater degree of abstraction than could be found in other modernist pictorial systems. Form, line, and color were not only liberated from material reality, but also sought to represent a new visual realm, a realm that did not exist outside the pictorial world. Surpassing the experiential distinction between space and form constituted, in Charmion von Wiegand's words, nothing less than a "new vision" of "pure plastic art, abstract and non-objective." What Mondrian painted "was not the creation of another reality but of another vision — the true vision — of reality." With a comparable ecstatic abandon, Charles Biederman characterized Neo-Plastic form as "a new art, an art of these times and not of ANY other."

Some American practitioners of Neo-Plasticism attempted to translate their reductive vocabulary into three dimensions, but they inevitably encountered problems with Neo-Plasticism's willed ambiguity of forms

and space. Nor could sculpture, by definition an object, accommodate Neo-Plasticist claims to a higher level abstraction through the eradication of the object itself. These perceptual and theoretical issues were vigorously examined and rigorously disputed. Some artists sought to retain a non-objective pictorialism within sculpture by constructing relatively solid, painted columnar forms. From any particular vantage point, a different two-dimensionally conceived Neo-Plastic composition could be perceived. Sidney Gordin's three-dimensional exploration of "form and color relationships in space" translated Neo-Plasticism's two-dimensional obliteration of form-space distinctions into sculpture in a different way. In order to underplay the natural physicality of the object, he created sharply rectilinear works that clearly define the voids between sculptural elements, making space as palpable as material form.

Few if any artists active in America throughout the 1930s and subsequent decades exclusively or consistently adhered to rectilinear abstraction, much less to the austerity of a staunch Neo-Plastic style. As advocates of modernist abstraction in general, almost all the artists represented in this exhibition experimented with a wide range of European modernist styles — including Cubism, Futurism, Purism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Bauhaus design, Surrealism, and even Expressionism — often creating hybrids of the various movements. In the careers of some American Neo-Plasticists, the influence of other modernist movements is often limited to an early, experimental period during the 1930s, before Neo-Plastic issues became their primary concern. Other artists, however, worked in a variety of modernist styles throughout most of their careers. Still others eventually abandoned rectilinear abstraction for more Surrealist or Expressionist directions during the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, the practitioners of a Neo-Plastic style in America never formed an exclusive group or distinct school separate from the larger body of American abstract artists of the period.

This lack of definition and cohesion makes it difficult to isolate strict Neo-Plasticism among the various abstract and rectilinear styles which emerged in America during the 1930s. What can be asserted is that a fairly large and definable group of works was heavily inspired by, greatly indebted to, or even somewhat derivative of the art of Piet Mondrian and the Neo-Plastic style he first formulated. There is considerable testimony by American artists, such as Leon Polk Smith and Charmion von Wiegand, concerning their first exposure to the

paintings of Mondrian. One of the earliest opportunities for Americans to view the work of Mondrian and other European De Stijl artists came in 1920 with the formation of the Société Anonyme, an exhibition association organized by Katherine Dreier to promote contemporary art in America, followed by the opening of A.E. Gallatin's Gallery (later Museum) of Living Art on Washington Square in New York in 1927. Twelve years later, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Painting (now The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) was founded.

In 1940, Mondrian himself immigrated to New York, where he lived until his death in 1944. Certainly his presence in America made his works more accessible — he had one-artist exhibitions in New York at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery in 1942 and 1943. However, the level of personal contact between Mondrian and American Neo-Plasticists varied widely. While most artists had only brief, largely public meetings with Mondrian, Harry Holtzman, who had made a virtual pilgrimage to Paris in 1934 for the express purpose of meeting Mondrian, was a close friend. Charmion von Wiegand was a devoted disciple of Mondrian's from the moment of their first meeting in New York and translated some of his essays into English. However, the paintings Mondrian executed in New York during the 1940s represented a significant departure from his early Neo-Plastic compositions in their more highly syncopated and densely delineated design. Some American adherents of Neo-Plasticism found these late works, with titles such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943-44), reflective of jazz rhythms and the cacophonous street patterns of New York. These allusions seemed to negate the insistent non-objectivity and purity of Mondrian's earlier abstraction. Others, however, interpreted such works as a license to freely experiment with the very foundations of Neo-Plastic composition.

Mondrian's original formulation of Neo-Plasticism was relatively strict and therefore exclusionary. The question arises, then, as to how far one can deviate from its tenets and continue to be considered a Neo-Plasticist. As practiced by the European group named after the journal *De Stijl*, founded to disseminate knowledge and understanding of the new art, Neo-Plasticism exhibited a variety of interpretations — and American advocates of the movement followed suit. Describing with confidence "my own version of *Neoplasticism*," Ilya Bolotowsky claimed that "*Neoplasticism* is still a living style. It is evolving but it is still *Neoplasticism*." Taken as a whole, no single defining characteristic

of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic style — not the exclusivity of the horizontal and vertical, or the concomitant limitation to the right angle, or the chromatic restrictions to the primary colors and the non-colors — was left intact by American practitioners of Neo-Plasticism.

While maintaining recognizable formal links to Mondrian's art, some Americans even rejected the theoretical motivations that had prompted the reductive vocabulary of Neo-Plastic form. Charles Biederman, for example, criticized Mondrian's insistence on a pure abstraction "divorced from actual experience of nature." However, the purpose and meaning of Biederman's art is largely determined by the degree to which he took issue with the various principles of Neo-Plasticism. It is precisely this intimate and consistent involvement that defines him, as well as others, as practitioners of a Neo-Plastic aesthetic in America.

From numerous statements and writings of the artists themselves, it is evident that a concern with composition was central to American Neo-Plastic aesthetic and theoretical discourse. Fritz Glarner assigned such titles as *Relational Painting* to his works, emphasizing the importance of the arrangement of forms. A call for rhythmic organization, the search for structural balance, the equalization of opposing forces, and the creation of an overall harmony among dynamic parts were inherent to the pronouncements of many artists. Charles Shaw avowed that "honest painting... embraces certain patent fundamentals. One seeks, for example, rhythm, composition, spatial organization, design, progression of color, and many, many other qualities in any aesthetic work." Characterizing her work as an "Architectural Abstract Art," Alice Trumbull Mason also expressed her interest in "making color, density, dark and light, rhythm and balance work together without depending on references and associations." Such convictions were repeated by Ilya Bolotowsky, who sought to "achieve unequaled tension, equilibrium, and harmony" in his painting. The establishment of an overall unity within the compositional structure of a canvas was generally the most insistent aesthetic mandate among American Neo-Plasticists. Harry Holtzman, for example, found value in "a unified or equilibrated presentation of spatial relationships," while Albert Swinden was moved by "the relationships between the particular forms and their significance as a unity." I. Rice Pereira perceived balanced, intersecting forms in her work as emblematic of the "relationship between the horizontal world of the senses and the vertical symbolic world of thought"; at this intersection, "a unity occurs."

Compositional unity and balance came to be broadly aligned by many American Neo-Plasticists with an idealistic sense of harmony in the world. Moreover, artists saw the annihilation of specific reference as a means to universal form. In language bordering on the reverential, Rice Pereira declared that "everything moves within a cosmic order," for which reason she wanted her painting to express the "Ideal or Absolute" and "a manifold of universal relations." Ilya Bolotowsky strove "to achieve the universal," an elusive goal which he proceeded to describe as "a Platonic idea or archetype of an ideal, harmonious relationship." In a similar vein, Harry Holtzman advocated the "comprehension of the object's significance and function as a tangible utility of universal meaning."

Although the expression of social and political ideals was certainly not limited to the Neo-Plasticists, it was they who consciously sought to conceptualize the relationship between a formal harmony in painting and a generally progressive worldview that promoted internationalism, condemned fascism, and embraced a liberal communality. Charmion von Wiegand championed the international: "abstract art formulated a new plastic language in which local, particular and national differences were gradually absorbed into a universal expression." When Ilya Bolotowsky recalled that he "came to prefer a search for an ideal harmony and order which is still a free order, not militaristic, not symmetrical, not goose-stepping, not academic," he was eloquently opposing his art to some of the most horrific political realities of the twentieth century.

During the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, some saw the realization of such collective ideals in the social and economic revitalization programs of the New Deal. Providing art commissions and thereby a livelihood for a good number of American abstractionists, programs such as the Works Project Administration — particularly the mural project administered by Burgoyne Diller — required the collaborative efforts of teams of artists. Other organizations, such as the American Abstract Artists and the Federation of American Artists, revealed, in Diller's words, a "camaraderie, or more important still, a kind of interaction between artists and artists groups ... that had not been witnessed before."

The promotion of common political, occupational, and economic concerns was never exclusively associated with Neo-Plasticism. However, many Neo-Plasticists were highly visible activists in the founding

and leadership of these programs and organizations. It is within this context of a perceived continuum between artistic forms and political ideals that Jean Xceron insisted that art "is something more than the mere discussion of surfaces, lines and planes." Suggesting that purely abstract forms can have a connection to non-formal issues, he implies an agenda for social change. Burgoyne Diller succinctly claimed that "the painter felt he had a more important, more basic social and cultural relationship." He recognized that "you can't disassociate... art as something separate from life and living and responsibility, after all, what is art? Something that exists in you, a sense of awareness...."

It is somewhat ironic that Neo-Plasticism — the modernist style motivated by the desire to be utterly non-representational — should have acquired a broad social and political perspective. By mid-century, however, Neo-Plastic philosophy and art had come to be seen as too naively utopian, too stridently moralistic, too ineffectively idealistic. Today, a pursuit of the universal is discredited as another way of repressing the indigenous and ethnic, of rejecting difference and diversity.

But in the early 1960s, American geometric abstraction — Neo-Plasticism included — was given a new, if somewhat contrary, life in the form of Minimalism. Rejecting the pretension of embodying universals and absolutes, Minimalists dismissed the concept of relational painting or the necessity of composing one section of a work in a balanced relation to another. They adopted the regularity of the grid, systematically repeated identical forms, and mechanically executed objects in order to create an art that frankly stood for nothing other than itself. It is again ironic that some among the hard-edge painters of the later Postminimalist generation used cursory rectilinear forms precisely for their capacity to make symbolic allusions and specific references. Today's attempts to investigate the potential meanings and functions of abstraction nevertheless continue to be informed and affected, often in an adversarial sense, by American Neo-Plasticism. Reinterpretations and reincorporations of its rectilinear, reductive forms remain a vital and ongoing tradition in contemporary art.

Karl Emil Willers

Works in the Exhibition

All works are from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth. Sight refers to measurements taken within the frame or mat opening.

Charles Biederman (b. 1906)

New York February 1936, 1936

Gouache on composition board, 29 15/16 x 21 3/16

Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 85.57

Study for Sculpture, New York, 1937

Color lithograph: sheet, 24 7/8 x 19; image, 14 5/8 x 11

Purchase, with funds from the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States Purchase Fund 84.14

Study for Sculpture, New York, 1937

Color lithograph: sheet, 22 7/8 x 15 7/8; image, 14 3/4 x 10 7/8

Purchase, with funds from the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States Purchase Fund 84.15

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907-1981)

Study for Mural, Williamsburg Housing Project, New York, c. 1936

Gouache and ink on board, 16 1/4 x 29 1/2

50th Anniversary Gift of the Edward R. Downe, Jr., Purchase Fund, Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller, and the National Endowment for the Arts 80.4

Large Vertical 51/59, 1951-59

Oil on canvas, 95 1/4 x 40 1/2

Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. N.E. Waldman 59.48

Blue Rectangles, 1953

Oil on canvas, 34 x 42

Purchase 56.1

Black Red Diamond II, 1967

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 52 x 52

Purchase, with funds from Philip Morris Incorporated 68.26

Burgoyne Diller (1906-1965)

First Theme, 1933-34

Oil on canvas, 30 1/16 x 30 1/16

Purchase, with funds from Emily Fisher Landau 85.44

Second Theme, 1938

Graphite and crayon on paper, 12 1/2 x 12 3/4

Purchase, with funds from The List Purchase Fund 79.5

Untitled, 1944

Collage on board, 15 x 15

Purchase, with funds from the Mr. and Mrs. M. Anthony Fisher

Purchase Fund, Martin and Agneta Gruss, and the Felicia Meyer Marsh

Purchase Fund 82.21

Third Theme, 1946-48

Oil on canvas, 42 x 42

Gift of May Walter 58.58

Group 2, #1, 1961

Collage of graphite, paper, and crayon on paper, 7 5/8 x 6 1/2 (sight)

Gift of Judith Rothschild and the Herbert and Nannette Rothschild

Fund, Inc. 76.2

First Theme: Number 10, 1963

Oil on canvas, 72 x 72

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum

of American Art 64.26

Fritz Glarner (1899-1972)

Relational Painting, 1949-51

Oil on canvas, 65 x 52

Purchase 52.3

Untitled, 1959

Lithograph: sheet and image, 20 x 26

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph J. Singer 73.11

Tondo No. 54, 1960

Oil on masonite, 48 diameter

Collection of Richard S. Zeisler

Study for Tondo, 1962

Pastel on paper: sheet, 20 1/2 x 13 1/8; image, 11 1/2 diameter

Purchase, with funds from The List Purchase Fund and the Charles
Simon Purchase Fund 80.44

Color Drawing for Tondo, 1964

Lithograph: sheet, 25 7/8 x 20 1/4; image, 18 1/2 diameter

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert C. Lee 66.105

Recollection, 1964-68

Unbound book of fourteen lithographs: sheets, 14 1/4 x 22 1/2 each

Purchase, with funds from the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Fund
77.83.1-14

Sidney Gordin (b. 1918)

Drawing, c. 1942

Graphite on paper, 10 15/16 x 8 1/2

Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 84.67

April 1953, 1953

Painted steel, 64 x 47 1/2 x 34 1/2

Gift of Raymond J. Learsy 84.71.2

Deflections, 1953

Painted steel, 16 3/4 x 58 x 15

Gift of Shirley and Menahem Lewin 75.28

Construction, Number 10, 1955, 1955

Painted steel, 36 x 41 1/2 x 27

Purchase 56.10

Harry Holtzman (1912-1987)

Untitled, c. 1936

Watercolor and graphite on paper, 7 3/4 x 8 5/16

Purchase, with funds from The Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, Inc., and the Drawing Committee 91.4

Michael Loew (1907-1985)

Interchangeable Forms, 1953

Oil on canvas, 45 x 32

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 63.30

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-1971)

Pale Column, 1956

Oil on canvas, 15 x 22

Gift of Emily and Wolf Kahn 74.1

Memorial, 1958-59

Oil on composition board, 36 x 28

Gift of Jonathan Alden Trumbull 59.22

Suspension Points (Surface Winds), 1959

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 1/8

Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.31

I. Rice Pereira (1902-1971)

Oblique Progression, 1948

Oil on canvas, 50 x 40

Purchase 48.22

Heart of Light, 1954

Oil on canvas, 49 3/4 x 29 3/4

Gift of Miss Sylvia Carewe 61.43

Landscape of the Absolute, 1955

Oil on canvas, 40 x 50

Gift of Richard Adler 56.15

Abstract Composition, n.d.

Graphite on paper, 10 13/16 x 13 15/16

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 78.12

Abstract Composition, n.d.

Graphite on paper, 14 7/8 x 18 1/2

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 78.13

Charles G. Shaw (1892-1974)

Plastic Polygon, 1938

Oil on wood, 38 1/2 x 23 1/2

Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 82.5

Leon Polk Smith (b. 1906)

N. Y. City, 1945

Oil on canvas, 47 x 33

50th Anniversary Gift of the Edward R. Downe, Jr., Purchase Fund
and the National Endowment for the Arts 79.24

Albert Swinden (1899-1961)

Sketch for Mural, Williamsburg Housing Project, c. 1936

Gouache on board, 11 x 21 3/4

Purchase, with funds from the John I.H. Baur Purchase Fund
and the M. Anthony Fisher Purchase Fund 81.1

Study, 1945

Gouache on paper, 15 x 12 1/4 (sight)

Gift of the American Abstract Artists 62.45

Study for Introspection of Space, 1948

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, 14 x 17 3/4

Gift of an anonymous donor 78.106

Introspection of Space, n.d.

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40

Gift of the Herbert and Nannette Rothschild Fund, Inc. 63.70

Charmion von Wiegand (1898-1983)

Untitled, 1946

Gouache on paper, 28 1/2 x 24 1/2

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Feinberg 69.112

City Lights, 1947

Oil on canvas, 32 x 24

Gift of Ruth Stephan Franklin 68.56

Triptych, Number 700, 1961

Oil on canvas, 42 1/4 x 54 overall

Gift of Alvin M. Greenstein 62.39

Jean Xceron (1890-1967)

Composition 273, 1945

Oil on canvas, 40 x 32

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum
of American Art 63.35

**Whitney Museum
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Charles Biederman (b. 1906)

New York February 1936, 1936

Gouache on composition board

Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 85.57

In these times of chaos not only is there the dreaded problem of mere survival, but of what kind of art should it be the business of artists to make. In the end it is as Rilke says: one chooses to do as one does, because life would be unbearable otherwise. Actually there is no choice; one goes the hard way because he has no alternative. If there were, I cannot see how one could choose the hard way! The latter must be a clean-cut necessity for survival, otherwise one will not survive that kind of life....

Too few artists realize that the scientific attitude consists of more than test tubes and charts; they are oblivious to the fact that it is a way of living, behaving, an attitude toward living one's life. Here again we have no choice; one either accepts the new conditions of living and exploits them for useful ends, or else one fights against them, and futilely so.

All the important things we are faced with having to do as artists today are things that have never been done before. And that's what makes for difficulties. We have to learn a new art, an art of these times and not of ANY other; and along with it a new orientation toward general living, and all this in the few years between the end of the diaper stage and the beginning of senility, if one has that much time.

One of these problems is that of artists working toward a common basis, a common objective, but not by means of force.

Charles Biederman, from a letter dated January 26, 1946, in *Letters on the New Art* (Red Wing, Minnesota, 1951), p.7

Charles Biederman (b. 1906)

Study for Sculpture New York, 1937

Color lithograph

Purchase, with funds from the Equitable Life Assurance

Society of the United States Purchase Fund 84.14

I think of the new art direction as one of single growth built to ever greater perfection by each new generation. In the same way, the pre-Camera artists succeeded in gaining ever greater accuracy in the recording of their art content, i.e., the macroscopic world of vision. This does not mean that all artists will work exactly like each other, but I think that in the beginning they will work more alike than later. For a new content develops, differences between artists can more readily appear for expression. What will be our criterion for the manner in which we shall achieve growth for the new content? Nature! as it always has been for the artists of the past, the difference being that Nature supplied the content for the past artists and for us supplies only the method. The BUILDING METHOD of nature is the new criterion, not the forms of nature. We are at the beginning of a new historic journey. We are like the Paleolithic artists who began the first primitive recording abstraction from nature, only we must make the first primitive abstractions from the structural process of nature. Like Cezanne we can say, "We are the primitives of the way." To the degree that each new generation expands its consciousness of the method of nature, to that degree it will expand and develop the new art.

Again I wish to emphasize that I do not present my views as dogma. I am like you searching for the road to the new art. But unless we find a basis for working together, then many will disintegrate under the sheer weight of having the whole world of art against them. They will escape to the path of the majority which allows each to do what he likes, so long as he avoids the discipline and maturity and sanity that characterize all the decent human qualities that belong to one living in an age of science. Look how but a handful of individuals ineradicably implanted their way of art upon history—the Impressionists, Cubists, De Stijlists and a few others. A few shook the world of art in its disgusting senility, disgusting fear of the new and false love of the great past.

Charles Biederman, from a letter dated December 12, 1948, in *Letters on the New Art* (Red Wing, Minnesota, 1951), pp. 37–38.

Charles Biederman (b. 1906)

Study for Sculpture New York, 1937

Color lithograph

Purchase, with funds from the Equitable Life Assurance

Society of the United States Purchase Fund 84.15

So the process from nature to the final object of art is this: we observe the rhythms of nature, study of which results in structural information; this is the Structural Process level of nature, i.e., inferential abstractions about how nature builds. Now we do not directly transpose this information to our art, for this would result in mimetic activity rather than the inventive intention of our art objective. We therefore TRANSLATE this process information into the terms of our MATERIAL AND OUT OBJECTIVE in much the same way as did the inventors of the airplane, their objective being the invention of a flying object but not the imitation of a bird.

At our present stage of art, really a "primitive" stage, we are concerned only with amassing GENERAL information regarding structure in nature, i.e., we are not concerned with the particulars alone, the structure of particular objects as such. When we study color and/or form and their composed rhythms in nature, we are concerned with this rhythmic structure, wherever we can grasp it in our observations. For our purpose is to ever enlarge the storehouse of our information about nature.

It would be reasonable to expect, however, that the future would find that artists will again follow the law of past art behavior and proceed from the general to ever greater knowledge of the particular.

Meanwhile, remember that it took thousands of years before artists of the mimetic period of art were able to devise a precise, conscious formulation of laws governing the structure of the visual image produced by nature's objects; the prime example being the laws about the relationships of form-color, i.e., perspective. Therefore, let us be patient, although I do believe that it will be possible to discover such laws even in our own times.

The great difficulty is the tremendous re-orientation which the new, the Structural Process outlook demands of us; and along with that we must realize an entirely new way of using language in the very difficult effort of translating new visual experience into the non-visual medium of language. This last is such a tremendous barrier that I believe only those who live such a thoroughly "visual" life as do the new artists can comprehend the difficulty.

Charles Biederman, from a letter dated December 4, 1950, in *Letters on the New Art* (Red Wing, Minnesota, 1951), pp. 67–69.

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981)

Study for Mural for Williamsburg Housing Project, c. 1936

Gouache and ink on board

**50th Anniversary Gift of the Edward R. Downe, Jr., Purchase Fund,
Mr. and Mrs. William A. Marsteller and the
National Endowment for the Arts 80.4**

My own work developed gradually, not in a completely straight path, from abstraction to *Neoplasticism*.... Soon after I had seen the first Mondrian one-man show in the Gallatin Collection at New York University on Washington Square, I saw the first Joan Miró show in New York at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. It attracted me immediately. Before long, I was combining the biomorphic forms with the rectilinear.... By...1939–40...the biomorphic elements were completely excluded from my work.... It took me a few more years to remove all diagonal lines and planes from my painting.... I was always very much influenced by *Suprematism*. I soon realized, however, that the difference between *Neoplasticism* and *Suprematism* is not only in the use of diagonals in *Suprematism*. Another important difference is the presence of background space in *Suprematism*. As a result, *Suprematist* paintings remind one of bird's eye views of tremendous snowy landscapes with houses. This is an aspect that *Neoplasticism* avoids. After a while, I found it necessary to give up the use of *Suprematist* background space in my painting.... More and more since the mid-'forties, my work became my own version of *Neoplasticism*. Unlike Mondrian, I did not limit my palette to yellow, red and blue. Unlike Mondrian and Vantongerloo, I, generally, assign the larger areas in a painting to red, blue, yellow, sometimes to violet and, sometimes, to black which I add to achieve a pseudo-vibration through clashing with the chromatic colors like reds or blues. White areas are most often reduced in size. At times, a juxtaposition of two closely related colors is used to create an ambivalent now appearing, now disappearing contrast. I seldom find need for black lines.

Why do I find it necessary to avoid the illusion of deep space, to give up all the interesting possibilities of contrasting geometric shapes? Why, I may be asked, is it necessary to impose such limitations on painting?

It is not always realized that *Neoplastic* style should not be confused with *Geometric* style and *Op Art*. *Neoplasticism* totally avoids the appearance of figurative images, whether straight or ambivalent.

Ilya Bolotowsky, from "On Neoplasticism and My Own Work: A Memoir," in *Leonardo*, Vol. II, no. 3 (1969), pp. 222–26 (Sections II and III: 'My Early Work' and 'My Work Since 1940').

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981)

***Large Vertical*, 1951–59**

Oil on canvas

Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. N.E. Waldman 59.48

Symbolism in my style is not at all important and actually is to be avoided. Because it means that a painting is not what it is, but represents something else....I can give you all sorts of reasons which may be completely false about why I prefer to paint in the Neo-Plastic style. It is my own reaction to whatever I experienced. Of course, other people who went through similar things paint automatic or Expressionist works—so that it is not necessarily an explanation that would fit every case. After I went through a lot of violent historical upheavals in my early life, I came to prefer a search for an ideal harmony and order which is still a free order, not militaristic, not symmetrical, not goose-stepping, not academic, you see. And this is my taste. Now you might say, where do you go from here, what do you do next? This somehow never bothered me because in the process of painting new possibilities develop and you can always go on. If your love of painting and your ability are sufficient, then your work will continue.

Ilya Bolotowsky, from an interview conducted by Louise Averill Svendsen with Mimi Poser, in *Ilya Bolotowsky*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1974), p. 32.

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981)

***Blue Rectangles*, 1953**

Oil on canvas

Purchase 56.1

I work in the neo-plastic style because for me it is the most meaningful and exciting direction in art. Neo-plasticism can achieve unequaled tension, equilibrium, and harmony through the relationship of the vertical and horizontal elements. This effect may be likened to epiphany or metanoia. Neo-plasticism is Neo Platonic. As a neo-plasticist, I strive after an ideal of harmony (a Neo-Platonic idea, an archetype that can have no existence but that has being). No artist can ever completely achieve this ideal in his work. Since an absolute archetype has being, a theoretical, absolute artist having painted one such archetype, would have to give up art. Luckily for us, in our Sisyphean existential predicament, we can go on painting and striving in our own imperfect ways, thus achieving the only sort of happiness allotted to us humans.

Ilya Bolotowsky, statement dated March 14, 1969, in *Ilya Bolotowsky/ Five Decades*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Washburn Gallery, April 4–May 5, 1984), n.p.

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981)

***Black Red Diamond II*, 1967**

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchase, with funds from Philip Morris Incorporated 68.26

This may be a proper moment to discuss the problem of continuity or, rather, longevity of style. The old, classical idea of the proper style that is something permanent, changeless and always right, is gone. In Madison Avenue art galleries, styles have been known to change twice in one season. It may be worthwhile to do a survey of some of the "greatest modern artists of the ages." And to see how long it takes before their brilliant rise is described as a dismal failure. Someone may also ask: What is *Neoplasticism*? And when did it die? In 1930 or in 1939? *Neoplasticism* was never a popular and well-sponsored and promoted style. Both the 1930 and the 1939 dates of its demise are wrong.... I should like to quote here a newspaper announcement by Samuel Clemens that is self-explanatory: "The announcement of my death is greatly exaggerated." *Neoplasticism* is still a living style. It is evolving but it is still *Neoplasticism*. In spite of its impersonal aim, de Stijl, as practiced by Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Vantongerloo and Domela was different with each one of them. The same is true of work by Burgoyne Diller and of my work. Vantongerloo was not satisfied with his primary colors and used secondary ones, such as violet and green. Van Doesburg even made use of diagonals. All of them, however, had in common the use of pure colors (...color used for its own sake not for imitation); the 90 angle, use of neutral, non-associative elements to achieve the universal. (The *universal* as used here is best described as a Platonic idea or archetype of an ideal, harmonious relationship. Any association with a figurative image would interfere with this archetype of true reality.) It may be said that when an artist does achieve the universal in painting, he has nothing more to paint. Luckily, like Sisyphus, we can never quite achieve our goal. Accepting our human limitations, we may go on painting....

I was interested, however, in unusual formats.... I liked to work on very narrow canvases, on square ones and since 1947 on diamond formats. A diamond format is obviously a square standing on one corner. The feeling of space, however, is much greater in a diamond area than in a square area of the same size. This is so because the vertical and horizontal measurements of such a diamond are larger than those of the square of the same size. One may object that vertical-horizontal Neoplastic painting on a diamond canvas creates

triangular shapes. I do not think that this objection is important. Is it because the rectilinear "tensions" are more important than the resulting triangles? For whatever reason, the viewer's eye seems to extend the triangles beyond the painting, without undermining the diamond format. The effect is still that of a rectangular relationship.

Ilya Bolotowsky, from "On Neoplasticism and My Own Work: A Memoir," in *Leonardo*, Vol. II, no. 3 (1969), p. 226 (Section IV: 'Is Neoplasticism Dead?').

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

First Theme, 1933–34

Oil on canvas

Purchase, with funds from Emily Fisher Landau 85.44

Do you know that's the first time in history that artists in these numbers ever came together? ... If before in any period artists came together, they came together out of one culture, one tradition... wherever it might have been, but here you had people from all over the world representing every culture, representing every viewpoint and united on the basis of art.... And he was firmly convinced that the work he did had a place in society,...was important to society, was important to the cultural development of America, but he's the last one that society would think of supporting unless he happened to be a mechanic who would do what they wanted him to do.... If he's a good decorator, or if he's a good illustrator, or painted what they thought to dictate was good art then they could use—and I mean probably literally use —him. But the painter felt he had a more important, more basic social and cultural relationship than this, and he felt he had as much right certainly to work, to produce his work as a ditch digger did that had to dig a ditch.

Bugoyne Diller, from an interview conducted by Dr. Harlan Phillips on Friday, October 2, 1964, in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, tape 1, pp. 12–13. Transcript in the Archives of American Art, New York.

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

Second Theme, 1938

Pencil and crayon on paper

Purchase, with funds from The List Purchase Fund 79.5

Collective seems to be a term of accomplishment in a sense. Actually, I think that what happened was for the first time there was an association of artists, and by that I mean mutual association because of mutual needs. For the first time artists were talking together in large groups so that there was a possibility of arriving at opinions that were mutually held. And God knows there are differences of opinion, but on the whole they were united by one very simple, basic thing. They needed to eat.... Of course, the artist,...he'd probably starve to death still wanting to paint a picture, but on the other hand, your primary concern was how do you feed yourself, how to you feed your family, and the artist was possibly, in some senses, considered the least employable, perhaps because of their eccentricities, or whatever you want to call the name for it. As a matter of fact, I found during that period that the artist was probably the most self-reliant, self-sufficient individual in the City of New York. You had some of your top-management people standing on a corner selling apples, but somehow or other the artist had so many accomplishments, craft accomplishments and related things that he could do, that he somehow or other survived. However, this did not keep the total specter of the wolf from the door, you know....

The next day what are you going to eat and how do you buy a tube of paint...? They all have this need. They get together and they talk about it, and if they talk about that, they can't help themselves because they're made that way, they also talk about art. Then they start having battles about art, and at that time, you know, the terrific thing was that on one hand you had a strong development of the social-scene painter, you know, "If you're painting abstractions, you're painting in an ivory tower" and, you know, "You're not relating yourself to society." Your abstract painter was saying, "Well, of course, if you're just a social-scene painter, you're just another medium of communication and a bad painting probably," and so on.

Burgoyne Diller, from an interview conducted by Dr. Harlan Phillips on Friday, October 2, 1964, in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, tape 1, p. 11. Transcript in the Archives of American Art, New York.

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

Untitled, 1944

Collage on board

Purchase, with funds from the

Mr. and Mrs. M. Anthony Fisher Purchase Fund,

Martin and Agneta Gruss, and the

Felicia Meyer Marsh Purchase Fund 82.21

I was personally very much interested in abstract painting and so on. They felt that there was no place for it at the time because they felt that the project (Works Project Administration) should be a popular program and, while they didn't attempt to invalidate or question the validity of the work, at the time abstract art had no place, because in a way you did a great problem of building up public sympathy and understanding and a demand on the part of the public for the work....

When I started assigning abstract things, and we had a number of very representational works, I felt certainly these people should have a voice, too. It was more difficult getting it, but I mean if I had ten jobs going, I could afford to start one that might be aesthetically a little questionable to some people....

You see, as the thing developed and there were so many murals going on, as I said, if you take a ratio of one out of ten, or one out of twenty, who is going to criticize it, because they are still valid works. They could be called decoration, if nothing else. They didn't have to be called art or anything—you know, abstract or anything. So you know the name was a dangerous thing. I found in other places that we introduced abstract work just simply by calling it, talking to their committees about the decoration, if you avoided the word "art", they were very happy.... Of course, if you introduced the word "art" then you were in for it, you see.... In other words they were people that didn't know anything about art, but they knew what they liked. But on the other hand they were much freer in their choice of decoration.

Bugoyne Diller, from an interview conducted by Dr. Harlan Phillips on Friday, October 2, 1964, in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, tape 1, pp. 27, 40–41. Transcript in the Archives of American Art, New York.

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

Third Theme, 1946–48

Oil on canvas

Gift of May Walter 58.58

It was...camaraderie, or more important still, a kind of interaction between artists and artists groups—that had not been witnessed before. A kind of interaction, you found you were meeting with people of very greatly different ideas and it was a challenge, a contest. It was arresting.... But all of them came out with some possible difference in attitude than they had before and probably a little more concern for what the other was doing. But after the dissolution of the Projects (Federal Art Project and the Works Project Administration) and so on there was still more of a meeting of artists than there had been previous to the WPA times. And I think that because of this and because of this association—well, I'm sure the group that later became the Abstract Expressionists and so on were obviously directed from this group because every one of them was a person who had been employed there and had been in contact with each other. Your Artists Union as such didn't continue too much. The (Artists) Congress certainly didn't, but on the other hand the artists club, the Art Club and so on, groups, particularly the Art Club where a good number of artists and forth gathered and debated, you know, their position in relation to the world, art, and so on. It resulted in the kind of impetus that shaped American painting for the last ten or fifteen years. No matter how you might question its validity, you know, and lasting value—these trite expressions for evaluating art—it still had an impact on the rest of the world. People came to America to see paintings. They even came to America to buy paintings....

Which is wonderful for American art.

Burgoyne Diller, from an interview conducted by Dr. Harlan Phillips on Friday, October 2, 1964, in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, tape 2, pp. 4–5. Transcript in the Archives of American Art, New York.

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

Group 2, #1, 1961

Collage of crayon, paper, and pencil

Gift of Judith Rothschild, and the

Herbert and Nannette Rothschild Fund, Inc. 76.2

Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965)

First Theme: Number 10, 1963

Oil on canvas

Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the

Whitney Museum of American Art 64.26

You know, I think that it would be a mighty difficult job to attempt to assess the values of so many things that came out of the Projects....

It certainly did an awful lot to create a more general activity and I've always had the feeling that art really develops through a kind of general activity. You can have your isolated geniuses, but it's always been somehow or other a product of a kind of ferment....

I was a sucker, I should have spent those years painting and let somebody else sweat out the bureaucracy.... Let's put it this way: for a short time with a few abstract painters I was employed on the FAP [Federal Art Project]. In the WPA [Works Project Administration] Program when it was set up with the attitude toward abstract painting, I would not have been acceptable. I couldn't have found my place there unless I was an assistant to somebody on a mural, or something, you see. And I knew, I made it a proven fact, if I did get in there, I could get jobs for other abstract painters. You see what I mean? It made it possible, and to me—after all, you can't disassociate, you know, art as something separate from life and living and responsibility, after all, what is art? Something that exists in you, a sense of awareness, or something. It was a wonderful opportunity to make it possible to do so and, as I said, I tried desperately and no matter how many hours I worked, I managed to sweat out a few hours of my own. I didn't stop producing, although God knows I was limited. As I said, this other was not a full time job, it was two full time jobs.

Burgoyne Diller, from an interview conducted by Dr. Harlan Phillips on Friday, October 2, 1964, in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, tape 2, pp. 5, 7, 10. Transcript in the Archives of American Art, New York.

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)

Untitled, 1959

Lithograph

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph J. Singer 73.11

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)

***Study for Tondo*, 1962**

Pastel on paper

Purchase, with funds from The List Purchase Fund

and the Charles Simon Purchase Fund 80.44

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)

***Relational Painting*, 1949–51**

Oil on canvas

Purchase 52.3

To liberate form, it is necessary for the form-symbol to lose its particularity and become similar to space. To liberate form it is necessary to determine space so that their structures become identical. When the form area and the space area are of the same structure, a new aspect arises in which pure means can reveal their intrinsic expression. The differentiation between form and space has to be established by color, proportion, oppositions, etc. Color, pure color, no longer assigned to dress up a particular form-symbol is free to act by its own true identity. It is my belief that the truth will manifest itself more clearly through this new condition.

Man can only free himself by a process of give and take. In painting form has to lose its specific identity and space has to acquire one by determination. To express life—its duality, its pulsations, its rhythms, its exact recurrences—the artist of our age should find through his own development the sensitive point of balance between the subjective and the objective expression.

Fritz Glarner, from *What Abstract Art Means to Me* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 10.

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)
Color Drawing for Tondo, 1964
Lithograph
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert C. Lee 66.105

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)
Recollection, 1964–68
Unbound book of 14 lithographs
Purchase, with funds from the
Richard and Dorothy Rodgers Fund 77.83.1–14

Fritz Glarner (1899–1972)
Tondo No. 54, 1960
Oil on masonite
Promised gift of Richard S. Zeisler P.19.79

A painter should never speak because words are not the means at his command. Words cannot express visually dimension at a glance—they can only establish their own relationship in time. However, it is possible for a painter, at certain moments of his development to formulate some of the problems he is facing in the growth of his work. A painting cannot be explained. Words can only stimulate the act of looking.

A visual problem is never put a priori as a mathematical problem but is born in the process of painting and evolves in a state of unawareness of the painter.

Throughout my search for the establishment of essential values, throughout my struggle to free my painting from the naturalistic, I was impelled little by little to dematerialize the object, eliminating all that appeared to me as superficiality, reducing it to an appearance no longer specific—to a form symbol. When the motive for the form-symbol can no longer be identified by the spectator, a degree of abstraction has been obtained.

Fritz Glarner, from *What Abstract Art Means to Me* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), p. 10.

Sidney Gordin

Drawing, c. 1942

Gouache and ink on paper mounted on paper

Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee 84.67

Sidney Gordin

April 1953, 1953

Painted steel

Gift of Raymond J. Learsy 84.71.2

I have always conceived my sculpture directly, using the process rather than pre-planning through sketches or models. This has been true of all of my work, using materials, tools and techniques as a means of conception along with analytical and intuitive processes.

Sidney Gordin, from a letter to Suzanne Vanderwoude, August 5, 1977, in the artists files of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Sidney Gordin

Deflections, 1953

Painted steel

Gift of Shirley and Menahem Lewin 75.28

Sidney Gordin

Construction, Number 10, 1955, 1955

Painted steel

Purchase 56.10

I find the act of meeting technical problems an aesthetic stimulant and technical limitations a challenge to deeper experience. Though the purpose of my work is to create visual poetry through form and color relationships in space, I respect and enjoy my materials and tools. I feel that the pleasure they give me helps me through the labor-pains of self expression.

Sidney Gordin, quoted by John I.H. Baur, "Sidney Gordin," *Art in America* (Winter 1954), p.70.

Harry Holtzman

Untitled, c. 1936

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Purchase, with funds from

The Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, Inc.

and the Drawing Committee

Unless he is a solipsist, the artist will formulate his energy to positive cooperation and not toward the indigent emphasis of mere personal reaction, limitation, or negation.... In relation to art, the impasse of the solipsist is expressed as the particularized attitude. The solipsist would have the means (to) become a merely egotistic function. It is characteristic of the particularized attitude to comprehend the object (painting, sculpture, construction) as an individualistic symbol, or as an individual's representation of symbol. This is opposed to the scientific comprehension of the object as a representation of intuition, perceptions and conceptual relationships, externalized and manifested within the limits of visuo-spacial means. The particularized attitude is in opposition to the comprehension of the object's significance and function as a tangible utility of universal meaning. While there is no question that the object proceeds from an individual source of identity, it is most important to emphasize that the object isolates itself, is an independent physical reality, impersonal and environmental. It is of qualitative value to us as a unified or equilibrated presentation of spatial relationships.

To the particularized attitude there is a split between content and form, and what in the object is considered as "style" is no more than a form mannerism. For the integrated attitude, content and form are simultaneous; the complete sensibility is expressed through the intuition of the direct use of the means. The object is commensurable and is in accordance with a corresponding concept of space equilibration and function.

Harry Holtzman, from "Attitude and Means," in *American Abstract Artists*, exhibition catalogue (New York: American Fine Arts Galleries, February 15–28, 1938), Section V, n.p.

Michael Loew (1907–1985)

***Interchangeable Forms*, 1953**

Oil on canvas

**Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the
Whitney Museum of American Art 63.30**

Because the geometric aspect of the rectangular structure can be both tyrannical and primordial, the problem of reducing the former quality and increasing the latter becomes a challenge—a challenge to the genuinely experiential.

Michael Loew, quoted in Sidney Tillim, "What Happened to Geometry?," *Arts* (June 1959), p. 43.

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904–1971)

***Pale Column*, 1956**

Oil on canvas

Gift of Emily and Wolf Kahn 74.1

Displacement is what I see happening when colours are placed beside each another. I intend displacement and not the APPEARANCE of one colour lying in back or in front of another. This is my intention because I am convinced that a work of Twentieth Century art should no longer imitate nature. An artist must be in tune with his period.... Much has transpired since Cezanne cut the first bonds, which for so long had held art to imitating nature. The last hard remnant of naturalistic art is the illusion of a third dimension on a two dimensional plane. Certainly when colours are placed beside each other a sense of transparency, solidity, coolness, heat, brilliance, dullness, light and dark and many other qualities come into being. Until Mondrian, these inherent qualities have been used to depict nature in a greater or less degree. These instruments have scarcely begun to be used. The first thing that any picture requires is spatial organization, the second is the establishment of the focal plane. NOT the canvas itself, but the median of all the qualities just mentioned. That is, by establishing certain areas, a median or focal plane is set up by these oppositions, and carried out in the rhythmic shifts of the spatial organization.... MY interest is in pushing abstract art into new ground.... If at moments one thing appears behind the other, you will soon find it corrected nearby. That is the rhythmic shift I have just been talking about.

Alice Trumbull Mason, from a typescript speech to the students of the Art Honor League, High School of Music and Art (1960s), in the Archives of American Art, New York, Roll 630, frames 171–72.

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904–1971)

***Memorial*, 1958–59**

Oil on composition board

Gift of Jonathan Alden Trumbull 59.22

In Abstract Art there are two fairly clear streams or directions. One is called Expressionist abstract art, the other, Architectural abstract art. The latter is the type of work that has always interested me, since finishing my academic training in 1929.

The new liberty achieved through eliminating subject matter in a painting brought with it a new discipline. A discipline which many artists have been aware of, but which, in a realistic painting, is always subordinate to the presentation of the subject.

In the middle of the 20th century an American abstract artist may choose to hold up a tragic, expressionist mirror to our time using no formal structure, or may choose to make painting a positive, architectural construction. Architectural is a fitting word to describe this work. It is building and not destroying. It is making colour, density, dark and light, rhythm and balance work together without depending on references and associations.

This is my concept of Architectural Abstract Art.

Alice Trumbull Mason, typescript statement (February 20, 1952), in the Archives of American Art, New York, Roll 630, frame 169.

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904–1971)

***Suspension Points (Surface Winds)*, 1959**

Oil on canvas

Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.31

During the past two centuries the pleasure in actual materials, paint, stone and so forth was forgone for skill in copying, and a sense of adventure in the use of mediums is completely lacking in the work of the majority of artists of that period. Today a sense of wonder is alive again. The abstract painter finds it, essentially, in his materials, and deals in the magic of textures, colours juxtaposed to force intensities which thus show movement somewhat as the sculptor shapes the air with his constructions. Wonder is in the work again as it was in primitive works of art. The abstract painter builds his canvas without representation or perspective but in relation to the fullest use of the elements of paint that have appeared from time to time throughout the history of art...

For the abstract artist the field of painting is too great to be bound to any literary content and this is why he breaks with the past and looks into a new experimental world. Free from representational limits, he is able to explore more fully the potential factors within his medium....

And here I would like to clarify the apparent confusion that many people seem to experience in regard to abstract art and that of the surrealists. Herbert Read makes the statement in his book *Surrealism* that: "Just as curiosity is the faculty which dares man to seek without the external universe... so wonder is the faculty which dares man to create that which has not before existed." Certainly this is true; the surrealists, however, still use their materials as props for narrative; they find a source of wonder in dreams, in automatism and in the subconscious, and depict this feeling academically by the extraordinary placing of objects and the unusual scale of them. Not working plastically, they seek to record such things as nostalgia, dreamlike fancies and incongruous shapes that have no part at all with abstract art. We look for nothing mystical or dreamlike but the magic in the work itself. Abstract art demands an awareness of the intrinsic use of materials and a fuller employment of these means which build a new imaginative world by using them for their own potential worth.

Alice Trumbull Mason, from "Concerning Plastic Significance," in *American Abstract Artists*, exhibition catalogue (New York: American Fine Arts Galleries, February 15–28, 1938), Section VI, n.p.

I. Rice Pereira (1902–1971)

Oblique Progression, 1948

Oil on canvas

Purchase 48.22

THE FORM OF GEOMETRY

Geometry is the Form of Space.

The Form of space is intuitively

perceived

according to the illuminating

intuitive law of the

intellect

and is simultaneously

conceived

according to the form-giving

intuitive law of the

senses.

Thus thought is PERCEIVED

Mathematically

as a dynamic of energy and

is simultaneously CONCEIVED

geometrically

as a Formal structure of

SPATIAL REALITY.

Geometry is the Formal structure

of thought.

The spirit of geometry is the

structure of Light.

The soul of geometry is the

structure of Space.

The structure of Space is

PURE FORM.

I. Rice Pereira, "THE FORM OF GEOMETRY," in *The POETICS of the FORM of SPACE, LIGHT and the INFINITE* (New York: privately published, 1969), p. 51.

I. Rice Pereira (1902–1971)

***Heart of Light*, 1945**

Oil on canvas

Gift of Miss Sylvia Carewe 61.43

More particularly, we can say that, at the intersection of the balanced relationship between the horizontal world of the senses and the vertical symbolic world of thought, that is, when the two movements—the senses and the intellect—have come into balance, a unity occurs. At the balanced point of intersection of the two movements—the sense and the intellect—there is an interaction within the whole. The center is polarized. And, energy is transformed from a passive, dormant but incubating state of inertia into an active state of kinetic movement.

I. Rice Pereira, from "The Simultaneous 'Ever-Coming To Be,'" in *Space, Light and the Infinite: Paintings by I. Rice Pereira*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Nordess Gallery, 1961), n.p.

I. Rice Pereira (1902–1971)

***Landscape of the Absolute*, 1955**

Oil on canvas

Gift of Richard Adler 56.15

The ALL that exists is related to a whole complex of existence. Man belongs to a universal class. A universal class is a relatedness to the Whole. Man, as a human, has a one-to-one correspondence with all humans; all humanity; the human race. There is no such thing as man without a corresponding likeness to the class of which he is part. The universal class makes man what he is. There is no existence as a state of unrelatedness; as nothing. Nothing creates Nothing. All created things have a creator, a source, and a universal class to which the created thing belongs.

Hence, we can propose to say that ALL that exists is related to a whole complex—a manifold of universal relations—founded in an elemental creative core. This is a necessary law of nature so that everything moves within a cosmic order. The cosmic order gives reason and form to life. Without this cosmic order—the Logos—which illuminates man's mind by giving intelligibility and form to his world—man's mind and world are enveloped by a chaotic abyss of darkness—a void of negation. The Ideal or Absolute toward which perceptions are directed sparks the spirit into the illuminative region of the mind; and energy is redeemed from the entropy of the finite.

I. Rice Pereira, from "The Simultaneous 'Ever-Coming To Be,'" in *Space, Light, and the Infinite, Paintings by I. Rice Pereira*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Nordess Gallery, 1961), n.p.

I. Rice Pereira (1902–1971)

***Abstract Composition*, n.d.**

Graphite on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 78.1

The proof that Man has of this
abstract symbolic ideal space
is its objectification;

geometrically;
mathematically;
philosophically;
through poetry;
music;
painting.

I. Rice Pereira, from "THE FORM OF SPACE," in *The POETICS of the FORM of SPACE, LIGHT and the INFINITE* (New York: privately published, 1969), p. 40.

I. Rice Pereira (1902–1971)

***Abstract Composition*, n.d.**

Graphite on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 78.13

I could sum up my philosophy in one sentence: "My philosophy is the reality of light and space; an ever flowing—never-ceasing—continuity, unfettered by man made machinery, weight and external likenesses.

I use geometric symbols because they represent structural essences and contain infinite possibilities of change and dynamics."

I. Rice Pereira, quoted in *I. Rice Pereira*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Andrew Crispo Gallery, Inc., 1976).

Leon Polk Smith (b.1906)

N.Y. City, 1945

Oil on Canvas

**50th Anniversary Gift of Edward R. Downe, Jr., Purchase Fund
and the National Endowment for the Arts 79.24**

In studio work [at Columbia Teachers College in New York], I studied with Ryah Ludins, a very intelligent woman who was a naturalistic painter herself, but there were no bounds to her appreciation. From questions I'd asked in class, she told me, she got the idea that she was not teaching what I really wanted to know. One day after class she said to me I want to take you to a collection down at New York University, the Gallatin Collection of Arp, Brancusi and Mondrian. She spent hours several times talking to me about these artists. And she said these are the greatest artists in the world today, the most advanced.... Mondrian was my great influence and he was my last influence. I haven't seen a painting by any artist since the '40s that has given me an idea about color or form.

Leon Polk Smith, from an interview conducted by Ted Castle in January, 1979, quoted in Ted Castle, "Leon Polk Smith: The Completely Self-Referential Object," *Artforum*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (1979–80), p.36.

Charles G. Shaw (1892–1974)

***Plastic Polygon*, 1938**

Oil on wood

**Purchase, with funds from the
Painting and Sculpture Committee 82.5**

It is repeatedly urged by the anti-abstractist and others of a more or less conventional turn of mind that painting, however able, of the non-representational brand is a comparatively slight affair.

"Lines here, dots there, here a circle, there a square, in one corner a triangle, in another an octagon...!!! Mere decoration." And with an impatient shrug, the subject is there and then dismissed.

"Pictures," they insist, returning to their home field, "must *look like* pictures. Pictures must *represent something*." Something preferably familiar, of course; but *something* nonetheless. Circles and squares and ellipses are all very well in their place, they admit; but in a painting, certainly not. Paintings must be *of something*. That the total assemblage of circles and lines may possess all the brilliance and beauty of the most realistic painting does not appear to matter.

The fact of their being "unpicturesque" is sufficient to damn them completely. Indeed, the very absence of the customary, hackneyed type of frame is often sufficient cause for distress among such folk. Naturally they are even more distressed by the presence of a clearly geometric pattern, which to them is not a picture at all and hence not art.

"More like a game than a painting," is yet another favorite critique. And not, in truth, because the geometric pattern is bad in design or lacking in movement or negative in value or possessing neither cohesion nor solidity or crude in colour or without depth or a score of other conceivable attributes. Such objections are never advanced. It is simply because the painting in question is frankly geometric in its purity. It is something off the beaten path, something unfamiliar, and therefore unpicturesque. Because the yellow disc in the left hand corner is not a summer moon caressing a tropic sea but merely an undisguised yellow disc, it fails to evoke that necessary something that summer moons and tropic seas invariably evoke among such picture lovers. Because slightly to the right of the centre there is a brick-red form that suggests a cross between a tibula and a dog-biscuit, but being neither a tibula nor a dog-biscuit, the necessary something is again unevoked. Because in the very centre there is a solid black rectangle that, try as they will, they cannot identify as a body of water, a pirate flag, a coal mine, a house, a coffin, or indeed anything, they are

at once irritated. And because a good third of the painting contains a rich *mattiere* of sand, not only are these good people irritated and unevoked but downright disgusted, as well.

"What does it mean?' they cry, sadly shaking their pates, "what is it all about?"

As if a work of art need necessarily be *about* something. For, alas!, the failure to be able to view a thing (indeed *any* thing) objectively is sorrowfully enough, a practice all too common even amongst those who profess the possession of a detached viewpoint.

"The thing's a monstrosity," they snort, turning away in disdain. "It's not even fit to be hung." Well, perhaps it isn't. But not, at least, for the reasons—or rather, dearth of reasons—given.

For these art, it would seem, lies solely in the conventional, and that which fails to fit into one of convention's well-worn pigeon-holes, however intrinsically plastic, is lost, and lost forever, upon such. Even discarding the question of prettiness (which nine times in ten such folk mistake for beauty) the fact remains that in their blinkered eyes art must rest within the bounds of that which is familiar. This is chiefly due, no doubt, to a prejudice born of habit; i.e. the habit of regarding an object without actually seeing it. Plus, of course, the inability to divorce the subject matter from the thing itself. For stripped of sentimental, familiar, or literary garniture, a work of art to only a few remains a work of art. It is not the vital structure, the essentials, that are sought but almost always quite the reverse—in brief, that which matters least.

Another accusation is that abstract art is cold. Again a sorry admission to a love for subject matter. For assuredly the fact of a work being abstract has nothing whatever to do with its coldness or warmth. Structurally it is the same as a representational picture, while obviously the colors employed may be the identical colors. But unaccustomed to pictorial purity, such critics again become confused by the very fact of simplification. And once more we hear the plaintive wail of unpicturesqueness, the confusion arising as usual from that which is truly picturesque (fit to be in a picture—hence plastic) and that which, from any aesthetic standard, remains, once and for all, illustrative.

All of which would indicate that such observers have not merely failed to *see* abstract art but indeed *any* art. For honest painting, regardless of its representational or non-representational merits, embraces certain patent fundamentals. One seeks, for example, rhythm, composition, spatial organization, design, progression of color, and many, many other qualities in any aesthetic work. Indeed it is the perfection of these very qualities that constitute an aesthetic work and there is surely no earthly reason why a painting may not possess

all such qualities and still be the most abstract picture ever painted. Art, since its inception, has never depended upon realism. Why, one cannot help wondering, should it begin now? Art, on the contrary, is (has been, and always will be) an appeal to one's *aesthetic emotion* and to one's *aesthetic emotion* alone; not for the fraction of a split second to those vastly more familiar emotions, which are a mixture of sentimentality, prettiness, anecdote, and melodrama.

Charles G. Shaw, "A Word to the Objector," in *American Abstract Artists*, exhibition catalogue (New York: American Fine Arts Galleries, February 15–28, 1938), Section I, n.p.

Albert Swinden (1899–1961)

Sketch for Mural, Williamsburg Housing Project, c. 1936

Gouache on board

**Purchase, with funds from the John I. H. Baur Purchase Fund
and the M. Anthony Fischer Purchase Fund 81.1**

Albert Swinden (1899–1961)

Study, 1945

Gouache on paper

Gift of the American Abstract Artists 62.45

Albert Swinden (1899–1961)

Study for Introspection of Space, 1948

Watercolor, gouache and pencil on paper

Gift of an anonymous donor 78.106

Albert Swinden (1899–1961)

***Introspection of Space*, n.d.**

Oil on canvas

Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild Fund, Inc. 63.70

During my first week at the Academy, my instructor, a pupil of Gerome, explained that there were a hundred or more tonal values reflected from the plaster cast I was contemplating. He advised me to reduce this complicated maze of values to two or three.

My instructor's idea of reducing values had nothing but academic aims, but it was a simplification. He would, I am sure, have been quite dismayed if I had reduced the Venus of Milo to two or three rectangles. It seems to me that his original concept, or abstraction, should have enabled him to recognize such a further reduction as consistent, had I so executed it.

What I mean by this is that the abstract method may be understood as a direct concern with the extension of principles used by all the significant artists of the past. What we examine and are affected by in any work of art, past or present, are the relationships expressed in it.

We are moved not only by particular, or individual forms, but by the relationships between the particular forms and their significance as a unity. As for instance, the difference between a figure fixed in a static pose and one in violent movement. Although the particular forms comprising the figure are practically the same in both instances, it is the different disposition, or relationship of these forms that produces the different effects. The particular forms give character and variety to the work; but, unless the particular forms function with relationship to one another, the work will have as little value as any object that functions only in parts but not as a unit. It will be incomplete.

By first limiting oneself greater concentration is made possible, permitting progression to fuller, richer forms. I understand simplification to mean a reduction of forms to an equivalent concept which embraces greater clarity and precision.

Albert Swinden, "On Simplification," in *American Abstract Artists*, exhibition catalogue (New York: American Fine Arts Galleries, February 15–28, 1938), Section II, n.p.

Charmion Von Wiegand (1898–1983)

Untitled, 1946

Gouache on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Feinberg 69.112

No one can foretell what ignites the human spirit and lifts it from the simple organic to another dimension. But we have been passing through an axial change in human thought since the beginning of this century. Whether it is the web of modern communication drawing the world closer together in time and space; the financial operations determining the world market; the physical sciences exploring the universe; the mental sciences — psychology and psychoanalysis — delving into man's soul; or simply the gadgets of daily existence — all this has been brought about by abstract calculations and determined by abstract relationships. Is it any wonder that the direction of art has followed this path? During and after the First World War, the pioneers of abstract art formulated a new plastic language in which local, particular and national differences were gradually absorbed into a universal expression. From the child to the mature individual, and from faraway cultures to the centers of modern civilization, this new ABC of world art in the making is open for all to read. Today it is widely accepted via advertising, typography, design, and architecture and is in use throughout the world. On higher esthetic levels, the tempo of change is slower and it may take time to merge the contributions of all past cultures and to create a world tradition in art. But today everything vitally creative in art takes place, for the most part, in the abstract domain; all the esthetic arguments are conducted on this level.

Cubism, which dealt the greatest blow to the old structure of art, marks the transition to this new vision. But all the movements of protest and destruction—fauvism, expressionism, futurism, cubism, dadaism, and surrealism—not only produced many beautiful works of art, but in distorting, dissecting, tearing apart, exploding, and eroding the natural image, they helped to prepare the way for a totally opposite expression. Out of them was born pure plastic art, abstract and non-objective.

Charmion von Wiegand, from "The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art," in *The World of Abstract Art*, edited by The American Abstract Artists (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1957), pp. 56–58.

Charmion Von Wiegand (1898–1983)

City Lights, 1947

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Stephan Franklin 68.56

The first paintings I saw by Mondrian were in the Gallatin Collection here in New York. My first reaction was that they were mathematical compared to the art I was interested in and I did not understand them. At the time Mondrian arrived in New York, I was writing art criticism and I had been a painter in my own right for some fifteen years....

I didn't meet Mondrian right away, although many of my friends did, his work was widely discussed, and some of it was reproduced. It was in the pamphlet *Five on Revolutionary Art* that I first saw his name in print and decided that it was time I met the man. I was sure, when I went to his studio the first time, that I would find it excessively disciplined. How wrong I was! From the first moment I met Mondrian, I was a total convert to his way of thinking and seeing. Our contact was a rare experience which only occurs once or twice in a lifetime. And from that first meeting, my eyes were transformed. When I went out into the street again, I saw everything differently from before: the streets, the buildings, my total visual environment.... That was April 12, 1941....

For Mondrian, life and art were really one thing. His ideal was "true life" which he defined as human life freed from external (objective) and internal (subjective) oppression. And art for him was a means to approach this end. Abstract art was not the creation of another reality but of another vision—the true vision—of reality. His vision was humanistic and universal, and he subjugated his ego to this quest for a true vision of reality. That to me is the definition of a great artist and a great man.

Charmion Von Wiegand, from an interview conducted by Margit Rowell on June 20, 1971, in *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944: Centennial Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972), pp. 78, 86.

Charmion Von Wiegand (1898–1983)

Triptych, Number 700, 1961

Oil on canvas

Gift of Alvin M. Greenstein 62.39

Every great historic movement in art has a period of exteriorization when its principles are demonstrated in the world, and a period of interiorization, when it turns inward to contemplate its own life. The decade of 1935–45 marks the first stage in the expansion of abstract art. In the years after the First World War, when the isolated pioneers were making their discoveries, the main current of art was flowing backward, seeking reconciliation with the natural image, late cubism, neo-classicism, Neu-Sachlichkeit, the right wing of the surrealists. But by 1930, the pioneers had emerged from obscurity to become leaders of a movement that swept Europe. In this era, the structural artists dominated the scene. But the rise of dictatorships and the events leading to the Second World War stopped all this development and many artists left Europe. The abstract artists who came to the United States during the war (Mondrian, Leger, Moholy-Nagy, etc.) exerted a profound influence on American painting and helped to implement its direction toward the abstract. The decade 1935–45 was the age of Mondrian....

The period immediately after the war saw the triumph of abstract art on a world scale. Its ideas were carried to distant and disparate countries from the Americas to Asia. But at the same time, a change occurred at the core of the movement; the pendulum swung from constructivist thought to the world of feeling. The decade which has just closed (1945–55) was the age of abstract expressionism....

Today's artists are, for the most part, in retreat from the structural and formal; they are moving from an objective expression to a subjective one, from conscious to unconscious creation, from an urge toward the universal to concentration on the individual personality.

Charmion Von Wiegand, from "The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art," in *The World of Abstract Art*, edited by The American Abstract Artists (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1957), p. 60.

Jean Xceron (1890–1967)

Composite 273, 1945

Oil on canvas

**Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the
Whitney Museum of American Art 63.35**

With the advent of *surrealisme* artists began to see the generating forces of modern painting on a metaphysical plane, and some of them attempted to express the visions of the world in pictorial terms which could hardly be called plastic form. To create liberal forms that would appeal solely to the forces of the subconscious, in preference to conscious conventionalized art, is the object of the devotees of Bergson and Freud who represent one pole of the present day art. But the Neo-plasticists or Elementarists better known as "Purists," who represent the other pole, went so far as to dispense with nature and life altogether by creating cerebral pictures with the divider and the T-square, having as their aim the final purification of painting as well as the other arts. While the surrealists experiment with the explorations of the instinctive world through the dream and the fairy tale, the ambition of Neo-plasticists is to make by means of angles and squares a well constructed picture that would convey to the spectator an abstract statement of purely subjective art.... Furthermore any art, whether it is *Neo-plasticisme*, *surrealisme*, abstract or concrete, that is not emotion producing, ceases to be a work of creative imagination and is liable to the danger of mechanical expression which is not at all concerned with the aesthetic form....

Art is something more than the mere discussion of surfaces, lines and planes. It is the harmonious development of mind and spirit expressed from within, and the one who is responsive to this inner vision is the artist. If the Neo-plasticists, purists, constructivists and abstractionists, have not yet produced works which might be a reflection of this principle, their method to attain what they call pure plastic form, at least has kept before artists the necessity of eliminating the unessentials.

Jean Xceron, "Neo-Plasticisme or Elementarist Art," *The New Review*, Vol. 1, no. 4 (Paris: Winter 1931–32), pp. 316, 318–319.